An early computer database of rural history restored

To the smythe of Stifkey for fickeltewes mendinge for the plowes 4d
To Dapling of Brinton for 3 combes of seed whete £1 15s 6d
Geven by Filbye to my master at Rayneham being lost by him at cardes £1 2s
To Father Gye for weavinge of 22 yardes of yard brode clothe at 2d the yard 3s 8d
To Mr Sprat for a thowsand bricke & 200 tyle to finishe the tirries in the garden 11s
Received of Mr Narford brewer of Norwich for 40 combes of malte at 9s beinge parte of his bargyn

Between 1979 and 1988 the Centre of East Anglian Studies within the School of History at the University of East Anglia created a database on the university computer system of an estimated 30,000 records transcribed by them from the manuscript accounts of Nathaniel Bacon's Stiffkey and neighbouring manors. The sources were various - the Norfolk Record Office, archives at Raynham Hall, university collections around the world - and *" they contain a vast quantity and range of information about the organization of a medium-sized household and estate in the late 16th century, and the lives of a gentry family and those who worked for and associated with its members….with topics for the study or picture of a subject such as farming, provisioning, social relationships or building operations."* [1]

Eventually in 2009 (!), as originally required by the main project funders the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the 1980s computer tape (found in a cupboard, almost certainly corrupted even if machinery to read it still existed) was either sent or intended to be sent to the UK Data Service at Essex University for copying and digital preservation; but there is no record of the database being received or uploaded onto their system, and newly created history computerised data there was around that time being refused as the service became the repository of only strictly social science and economic data.

Fortunately the collection at the Norfolk Archives in Norwich of Professor Hassell Smith, the project's instigator (as a sub-project of the collecting, editing and publishing "*The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey"* - now 7 volumes between 1979 and 2023) includes notes and papers on the database project, in particular many hundreds of still fanfolded pages of dot-matrix printout and it was from these that the database in spreadsheet format has been reconstructed. The printouts of the informative kitchen accounts (1592 - 1596) have not been re-inputted (a project for someone) but are available at Norfolk Archives, as are the somewhat degraded photocopies of all the original manuscripts.

Apart from the usefulness of its online availability, the database, often referenced in the Bacon books above and in academic papers partly or entirely reliant on the data, [2] restores the necessary and sought-after accessibility of primary sources to those books and papers. The individual spreadsheets, largely reproducing the arrangement of the printouts, are available via the Norfolk Archives with Accession Reference ACC 2025/121, Reference MC 3972 as

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[1] From the project "manual" submitted to the ESRC in 1988 (Norfolk Archives ref ACC 2012/72/4) This document explains the original project's aims, process and outcome in great detail.

[2] e.g. Labourers in late sixteenth-century England: a case study from north Norfolk
Author: A. Hassell Smith Publication: Continuity and Change
[Part I] Vol 4 (1), 1989 https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416000003581
[Part II] Vol 4 (3) 1989 https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416000003775

downloadable adjuncts to the Hassell Smith Collection, which comprises 5 separate deposits between 2010 - 2012.

They comprise:

Steward's Accounts (May/June 1576 - Aug 1577) Expenditure & Receipts
Steward's Accounts (Midsummer 1587 - Michaelmas 1597) Expenditure & Receipts
Estate Yard Accounts (Dec 1588 - Dec 1598) Expenditure
Labourers' Accounts (May 1582 - May 1584) Expenditure & Receipts
(*somewhat misdescribed; they are in large part general building accounts for Stiffkey Hall including many different trades and suppliers*)
Kitchen Accounts (Aug 1592 - June 1596) Expenditure (*not in the reconstruction)*

The subject divisions used are below, with every record having a 2 letter code [3], enabling sorting and grouping.

ADMINISTRATION - personal, household and estate; public
AGRICULTURE - activities; estate maintenance; implements; livestock; livestock produce; processing; production arable; products purchased; wages
BUILDING inc. REPAIRS - materials (including making and preparing); tools; wages; work
BUSINESS - Bacon's expenditure; Bacon's income; general
CRAFTS and Industry - local
EDUCATION / CULTURE
FAMILY - relations with
GARDEN
HOUSEHOLD - furniture & furnishings; general; provisions (acates, store etc); service court; utensils & supplies for household departments; personal clothing & adornment
MEDICAL
SOCIAL
TRAVEL and TRANSPORT

Code examples:

AW Lump sums for wages - Building / Repairs
CR Rye - Agriculture Production
CS Hides / skins and their preparation eg. tanning - Agriculture Livestock Produce
CT Reeds, reeding - Building Materials
CU Saffron cultivation and sales - Agriculture Production
WB Books purchased - Education / Culture
WC Cistern and pump (forcer) - Household Service Court
WD Consultations with doctors, apothecaries, wise men and women - Medical
WS Laundry, including purchases of soap and starch - Household Provisions / Store
WV Mole and vermin catching - Agriculture Activities
YB Boots and shoes - Household Personal Clothing
YP Barber - Household general
ZB Personal items bought for Bacon's wives and daughters - Household General
ZF Miscellaneous purchases of implements and agricultural ironmongery - Agriculture Implements

[3] The full list of codes is included in the Norfolk Archives spreadsheets & notes download reference above